

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT  
GENERAL COMMITTEES

Public Bill Committee

## AGRICULTURE BILL

*Fifth Sitting*

*Tuesday 25 February 2020*

*(Morning)*

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CLAUSE 1 under consideration when the Committee adjourned till this day  
at Two o'clock.

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**Saturday 29 February 2020**

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chairs:* SIR DAVID AMESS, † GRAHAM STRINGER

† Brock, Deidre (*Edinburgh North and Leith*) (SNP)  
 † Clarke, Theo (*Stafford*) (Con)  
 † Courts, Robert (*Witney*) (Con)  
 † Crosbie, Virginia (*Ynys Môn*) (Con)  
 † Debonnaire, Thangam (*Bristol West*) (Lab)  
 Dines, Miss Sarah (*Derbyshire Dales*) (Con)  
 Doogan, Dave (*Angus*) (SNP)  
 † Goodwill, Mr Robert (*Scarborough and Whitby*)  
 (Con)  
 † Jones, Fay (*Brecon and Radnorshire*) (Con)  
 † Jones, Ruth (*Newport West*) (Lab)  
 † Jupp, Simon (*East Devon*) (Con)  
 † Kearns, Alicia (*Rutland and Melton*) (Con)

† Kruger, Danny (*Devizes*) (Con)  
 † McCarthy, Kerry (*Bristol East*) (Lab)  
 † Morris, James (*Halesowen and Rowley Regis*) (Con)  
 † Oppong-Asare, Abena (*Erith and Thamesmead*)  
 (Lab)  
 † Prentis, Victoria (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of*  
*State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*)  
 † Whittome, Nadia (*Nottingham East*) (Lab)  
 † Zeichner, Daniel (*Cambridge*) (Lab)

Kenneth Fox, Kevin Maddison, *Committee Clerks*

† **attended the Committee**

# Public Bill Committee

Tuesday 25 February 2020

(Morning)

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

## Agriculture Bill

9.25 am

**The Chair:** Before we begin, I have a few preliminary points. Will Members switch electronic devices to silent? Tea and coffee are not allowed during sittings.

Today, we will begin line-by-line consideration of the Bill. The selection list for today's sittings, which is available in the room, shows how the selected amendments have been grouped for debate. Amendments grouped together are generally on the same or similar issues. Decisions on amendments take place not in the order they are debated but in the order they appear on the amendment paper. The selection list shows the order of debate. Decisions on each amendment are taken when we come to the clause that the amendment affects. I will use my discretion to decide whether to allow a separate stand part debate on individual clauses and schedules following the debates on the relevant amendments.

I hope that is helpful. The process and procedures are very similar to those in the Chamber. If any Member is new to this and requires assistance, the Clerk and I will be as helpful as we can to support proceedings.

### Clause 1

#### SECRETARY OF STATE'S POWERS TO GIVE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, in clause 1, page 2, line 6, leave out "may" and insert "must".

*This amendment would require the Secretary of State to provide financial assistance for the purposes listed in Clause 1.*

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I welcome everyone to the Committee. I suspect we will have lengthy and interesting discussions, and I am sure we are all very much looking forward to that.

To those who were here some time ago for Committee stage of the Agriculture Bill in the last Parliament, the amendment will look remarkably similar to the opening amendment then, although of course the world has moved on. This is a big issue, but I would like to preface my detailed "may"/"must" comments with some overarching observations.

I should make it clear from the start, as we did on Second Reading, that the Opposition support many of the principles underlying the Bill. Indeed, as I have pointed out before, one can find similar sentiments about improving the common agricultural policy and making it more environmentally friendly as far back as Labour's 1998 rural White Paper. We have already said that the shift to incentivising farmers to provide greater support for the environment and deliver public goods, and to providing finance for that, is welcome.

I think there is widespread agreement about that—interestingly, not just in this country. Those who were present at yesterday's debate on an agriculture statutory instrument will know that I spent some time then explaining how the European Union has sought to green the common agricultural policy, including by promoting measures such as environmental land management schemes. I observed that I find it slightly puzzling that a Government so enamoured with burnishing their green credentials did not fully use flexibilities such as the 15% in pillar 2 that could have been transferred to environmental schemes in England. However, a repentant sinner is always welcome—despite the nagging suspicion that some may not be entirely repentant.

The Opposition seek to work constructively to improve the Bill, but also to tease out what we see as some of the underlying contradictions, not least by pointing out that the Government are proposing a framework system for agriculture that does not see food production as a key part of its role. I quite understand why those fighting for a shift to environmental goods—they have fought the good fight for many years—may be nervous about the risk of business as usual through the back door, but we must be aware that just exporting our environmental damage somewhere else does not help. I must say that the Secretary of State's continuing refusal to put into law the standards we need to apply to imported food does little to assuage concerns, and his comments at the weekend did little to reassure us. We will return to that at a later stage.

Members do not just have to take my word for that. They might want to look, for instance, at the powerful response to the new immigration system from the British Poultry Council last week. Its chief executive, Richard Griffiths, said the proposals

"have shown a complete disregard for British food production and will have a crippling effect on our national food security"—a very strong statement from an industry leader. He continued, and this is the salient point for this morning:

"We cannot run the risk of creating a two-tier food system where we import food produced to lower standards and only the affluent can afford high quality British produce".

That is the danger—some farmers paid via environmental land management schemes to do good things, with a bit of food production on the side, while the food that most people in our country eat is imported to lower standards. That is the risk, and we will not take it.

Our support is qualified on the Government coming clean on the plan. On a day when Sir Michael Marmot has laid out the consequences of the policies of the last 10 years—shameful consequences in my view—it is hardly surprising that people are worried, because the creation of a two-tier country is part of a piece, and the architects of this Bill have also been responsible in other policy areas for where we find ourselves today, in a disunited kingdom. We are not prepared to see this continue. For our purposes today, how much better if we had had the food strategy, and probably the Environment Bill, in place already, but we are where we are.

Having made trenchant criticisms of the Government, it would be churlish of me not to acknowledge that there have been improvements since the first version of the Bill, and we welcome them. We have noticed that the Government have been responsive to constructive criticism of their proposals and made additions to the Bill from its previous incarnation, following strong interventions

by stakeholders. We hope that the Government continue to be receptive to improvements, because we believe there is certainly room for improvement.

It is precisely because changes have been made to the Bill, and because the climate and ecological crisis has become ever more pressing in the year or more since the Bill was last in Committee, that it is so important that we have returned to scrutinise this new version of the legislation. Our amendments are intended to strengthen the Bill—to give it more bite and deliver greater certainty to our farmers, to tackle the health and climate crises, and to fill in some of the gaps and missed opportunities.

I turn to “may”/“must” in amendment 1. Clause 1 gives the Secretary of State the power to provide financial assistance for the public goods purposes listed in the clause. It stipulates that the Secretary of State may do this, but there is no requirement to do so. Our amendment would change that, so that the Secretary of State must provide financial assistance for those clause 1 purposes, which I suspect we will debate at some length.

The simple fact is that the Secretary of State is not bound to do those things; they do not have to do them. The Government have guaranteed the previous annual budget under the common agricultural policy to farmers for every year of this Parliament, but what about after this Parliament? What guarantees do we have that financial assistance will continue to be provided for these public good purposes if that is not a strong requirement in the Bill?

What guarantee can the Minister give that the promised budget will be allocated? We still do not have the long-promised broader policy statement on ELMS. I wondered whether that was what the Prime Minister was working on at Chevening last week—I can imagine him spending his week doing the detailed policy work—but I am told that it is imminent and will be available within minutes. I think it is slightly disrespectful to Parliament to introduce such an important part of the policy process half an hour after Committee proceedings have started—I am sure we will all spend our lunch time poring over it.

I understand that the Secretary of State’s need to avoid the difficulties of his predecessor earlier this year and to have something to talk about when he is at the National Farmers Union—once a pressman, always a pressman. I rather admire that; however, I think we should have seen the statement before today.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I arrived in the office just before nine this morning to discover that these documents had been produced. That makes things very difficult, because we may have missed the opportunity to table amendments to this part of the Bill if anything in those documents raises concerns. As my hon. Friend said, it is wrong that this situation has been dictated by the need for the Secretary of State to make a speech at the NFU this morning. The Committee should take precedence.

**Daniel Zeichner:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are politicians and we know how the world works, but it is a pity. This Government have a strong majority and are at the start of their term; surely they should not be running scared so soon. Frankly, it speaks volumes. I do not blame the Minister—I am sure she is doing what

she has been asked to do—but this raises particular difficulties for us. Until we have seen the documents, we will not know whether we should have tabled different amendments. We probably have a fair idea of what is in there, but this is no way to proceed.

Do we know that the money will actually be allocated? This is a change to a new and complicated system. The experience of stewardship schemes in the past is that they have not always been easy. We heard very enthusiastic evidence the week before last from some who say that everything will be wonderful. That is not what I hear from others. The question in my mind is whether budget allocated will be different from budget taken up. My sense is that many farmers think they are going to get the same kind of money, minus the 10%, in the years ahead. They may not. There is no guarantee that they are going to get the same amount for doing something slightly different. The money may be allocated in very different ways, which is part of the concern that people feel.

The shift that we need to see in our agricultural systems towards producing food in a way that is less destructive to the environment and that reduces agriculture’s contribution to climate change is too important to leave to the optional discretion of Secretaries of State. Under the current wording, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position whereby current and future Secretaries of State will be under no actual obligation to provide financial assistance to address agriculture’s contribution to climate change, despite that supposedly being a key driver of the Bill.

If the Government understand just how important the environmental and climate crisis is, it really is not such a tough ask for them to back up their commitments with stronger wording in the Bill. Others had the same discussion about the previous iteration of the Bill, so I am well aware of the current Secretary of State’s arguments against the change—that by keeping this as a power and not a duty, the Government are following a legislative tradition—I am sure the Minister has been given appropriate examples to make that point. I will not re-rehearse the point, but she will note that it was not only the Opposition who expressed that concern last time. She may find that some Members on her side of Committee care and worry about this issue. I would gently point out that the circumstances are really rather different now; in fact, the case has been strengthened since the previous discussion, given the climate emergency that we are facing. We hardly need look very far around the country to see the evidence of that.

Of course, we are also now leaving the European Union and embarking on a journey of considerable financial uncertainty for farmers and the wider rural community. That is why we need strong legislative commitments that guarantee long-term support for the environment and the climate, and financial certainty for our farmers. All that the amendment would do is make it a requirement to provide the financial assistance.

Other measures in the Bill are worded as requirements. Clause 4 makes the preparation of multi-annual financial assistance plans a requirement, while clause 17 obligates the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on UK food security. There are other provisions in the Bill where the power is a duty. The amendment would ensure that clause 1, which is pretty much at the heart of what we are talking about, has equal standing to other

[Daniel Zeichner]

clauses. Shifting the power to a duty would rightly open the Secretary of State's actions up to proper parliamentary scrutiny. If it is the law that the Secretary of State must provide finance for those essential activities, and they do not, they can be held duly accountable.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Victoria Prentis):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, at this very exciting time for agriculture. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his broadly kind words this morning and for his acceptance that we have a great deal in common across the House, as we move forward in planning the next stages of food production, farming and other systems that we want to implement to make sure the environment is better protected. We have much in common in this area at the moment.

As a newbie to this Committee, I also welcome those who served before and who, as the hon. Gentleman said, did a great deal to improve the Bill, which appears before us today in a new, streamlined form. Clause 1(4) includes an important mention of the role of food production as part of what we do in our countryside. It makes it clear that encouraging the production of food in an environmentally sustainable way is necessary. That is one of the most important changes made to the Bill, and I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to standards. I am sure we will return to this discussion, probably next week, when we discuss imports and how that issue will be taken forward. I ask him to accept that my predecessor and I—and, indeed, many Government Members who are interested in agriculture—have always been clear that it is important that we are committed to the highest possible standards of food production. We want reasonably priced food, but produced to a standard of high ecological and animal welfare.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Can the Minister clarify whether she is talking about standards in the UK or standards of imports, too?

**Victoria Prentis:** It is a great pleasure to take an intervention from the hon. Lady. She and I have worked together for many years on food waste reduction, so we have had a certain amount to do with each other in that sphere.

The Bill deals with standards in British agriculture that we impose on our farmers. It is inevitable at this exciting time for our nation that we will also stray into discussions on imports. I do not wish to shut those discussions down, however the Bill concentrates on the financial assistance that we give to the people who produce food in our countryside and are engaged in other schemes that, hopefully, will help us to enhance the environment.

I wish to restate the Government's commitment to giving farmers, stakeholders and the public as much certainty as possible as we move away from the common agricultural policy towards our new policy of public money for public goods. I know that the previous Committee discussed at enormous length whether "may" or "must" should be used. As you may have heard, Mr Stringer, I am a former Government lawyer, and I am aware of the way in which legislation is often framed. When talking about financial assistance—which

I politely say is what makes this different from the other clauses that the hon. Member for Cambridge referenced—it is traditional, in this sphere at least, although not in all Government legislation, to use the word "may". Two examples are the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and the Science and Technology Act 1965, which both use the word "may" when discussing financial assistance. I would suggest that, in this situation, that is not an unusual piece of drafting nor one that in any way lessens our commitment to providing the financial assistance to which we have committed for the remainder of this Government.

We listened to hon. Members' concerns during the passage of the first version of the Bill and have included new duties relating to financial assistance. The provision of the multi-annual financial assistance plans under clause 4 is a significant change, which sets out our strategic priorities for financial assistance under clause 1, with the first plan starting in 2021 to cover our seven-year transition period. Publishing these plans and other reports required under part 1 will ensure greater transparency and provide necessary certainty about the amount of public funding that has been allocated under clause 1.

9.45 am

Clause 5 includes a new duty on the Secretary of State to prepare an annual report, which will give further details of the financial assistance given under clause 1. Clause 6 gives a duty to prepare reports on the impact and effectiveness of the financial assistance schemes. The plans and reports also give Parliament—and, of course, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the public and anybody interested—the ability to scrutinise the Government's plans for financial assistance schemes, to check that the future funding decisions under the Bill powers will be aligned with our strategic priorities and to hold the Government to account on how much they are spending.

There is no doubt that the Government intend to use the financial assistance powers in clause 1. The new duties in clauses 4 to 6 will ensure ample opportunity for scrutiny. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to the Minister for clarifying some of those points. She said that the Government aim to create as much certainty as possible. That is sadly not how it feels to many in the sector. Part of the reason for people's concerns is that they wonder why some of this was not in the original Bill. That is why I keep returning to the underlying philosophical principles driving this. That is my concern and what has fed people's worries.

Of course, we welcome the changes and improvements to the Bill. However, as I said earlier, Government Members raised questions 14 or 15 months ago. I suspect they will not necessarily be reassured by this. They would like to see something stronger, as we would. That is why—as this part of the Bill is so important—we will press the amendment to a Division.

I noticed—although I am not surprised—that the Minister did not feel able to respond to the observation from the British Poultry Council. Those are very strong statements coming from some sectors. I am of an age that I can remember the debates about manufacturing in the 1990s. I recall a visit that I made to one of the

shoe factories in Norwich with the late, great Robin Cook. We were stunned to hear from that business that they had had a visit from a very enthusiastic Minister in the then Conservative Government to tell them, essentially, that they were not needed any more; the future was going to be different.

My concern, which is reflected by others, is that extraordinarily, in our great country, with its wonderful rural traditions, there is in some quarters a school of thought that sees the same outcome as a possibility for agriculture and farming. That is why we are so concerned and why we believe the powers should be strengthened.

**Mr Robert Goodwill** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman not concerned that the inclusion of the word “must” could open up the Government to judicial review from farmers who could make a sensible argument that not all the objectives are being fully funded? They could then revert to the courts to try to get that through. That is not what I believe the Government should be doing with the Bill.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I always listen carefully to the right hon. Gentleman, because he knows of what he speaks, but I wonder whether that is a slight red herring in this case. What he warns of could come about, but on balance I would say that that is a risk worth taking to strengthen the Bill. To me, the risks that I have just outlined are greater.

I have huge confidence in the future of the sector, but some ideologues in the world have strange ideas. I do not think that is unique to one party or another. I would just caution Government Members to be aware that they, too, have people with some interesting thoughts on their side. In my view, the country needs such people to be seen off. I suspect that there is, if not unanimity, then considerable cross-party support for that point. We want our agricultural sector to continue to thrive and prosper. Food production is a key part of that, and we want that strengthened in this legislation. On that basis, I will press the amendment to a Division.

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.*

#### Division No. 1]

##### AYES

Debbonaire, Thangam	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

##### NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Morris, James
Jones, Fay	Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**Daniel Zeichner:** I beg to move amendment 2, in clause 1, page 2, line 8, at end insert—

“(aa) supporting agriculture and horticulture businesses in enabling public access to healthy food that is farmed in an environmentally sustainable way, including food produced through whole farm agroecological systems”.

*This amendment would add to the purposes for which financial assistance can be given, that of ensuring access to healthy food produced sustainably including through whole farm agroecological systems.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 11, in clause 1, page 2, line 24, at end insert—

“(k) establishing, maintaining and expanding agroecological farming systems, including organic farming.”

Amendment 3, in clause 1, page 3, line 6, at end insert—

“‘environmentally sustainable way’ means in a way which employs factors and practices that contribute to the quality of environment on a long-term basis and avoids the depletion of natural resources”.

*This amendment defines “environmentally sustainable way” for the purposes of clause 1(4) and Amendment 2.*

**Daniel Zeichner:** Amendment 2 seeks to address two issues: what we consider to be a lack of proper emphasis on access to healthy food, and the missed opportunity to support whole-farm agroecological systems more explicitly. As I have intimated, for a Bill on food production, there is very little about public access to food and how the Government could support moving the sector towards producing healthy and sustainable food for our citizens. There is a nod to the broader issue of food security in clause 17, which we believe can be improved, and to which I will return.

This is a Bill about agriculture and public goods, and it is important to recognise that access to healthy, sustainable food is a public good, and one that should be eligible for financial support. I suspect that economists would go into technical detail about what public goods may or may not be. We believe there is a market failure in this country. We need to provide people of all income levels with access to fresh, nutritious food, no matter where they live. Last year, a study by the Social Market Foundation think-tank suggested that more than 1 million people in the UK live in so-called food deserts—neighbourhoods where poverty, poor public transport and a lack of shops and supermarkets are seriously limiting access to affordable fresh fruit and vegetables. That has clear public health implications.

We all know that we have rising levels of obesity, and we know about the strain that puts on the NHS. Only yesterday, we heard that record numbers of people are developing type 2 diabetes. I have already referred to today’s report by Sir Michael Marmot, which we should all feel anxious about. We also know that with rising food poverty, we are in the upsetting position of having more food banks than we have branches of McDonald’s restaurants—over 2,000. That statistic is frequently cited. There is an obvious opportunity here for provisions in the Bill to enable the Government to support the core production of food and food distribution in a way that facilitates access to healthy and locally produced foods at an affordable price. There is a clear need to boost our supply of fruit and vegetables, so that people can access food that is closer to home, more affordable, fresh, and sustainably produced. Provisions could facilitate community-supported agriculture and encourage local public food procurement. The Government could also be enabled to give farmers the support they need to reduce UK reliance on imported food. We will come back to the issue of the balance of locally produced and imported food.

If the Government are not convinced that some of this can be done, I invite them to visit my Cambridge constituency to see the innovative work led by Labour

[Daniel Zeichner]

Cambridge city councillors Katie Thornburrow and Alex Collis, including community gardens in some of the new developments in Trumpington, on the edge of the city. These innovative pioneering schemes show that it can be done: they are a real opportunity to work with food producers, but are currently outside the scope of funding as a public good. This is not about returning to the common agricultural policy and simply paying farmers to produce food; it is about supporting public access to food that is healthy and local, and recognising that it is a public good in itself—with all the potential public health implications.

Amendment 2 explicitly allows for the provision of financial assistance to support food produced through whole-farm agroecological systems. The Government have made a move towards recognising the importance of agroecology clause 1(5) of the Bill by clarifying that financial assistance that farmers can receive under clause 1(b) for supporting a better understanding of the environment among the public includes a “better understanding” of agroecology. A “better understanding” is about education. It does not financially support the adoption of agroecological principles by farmers. In their written evidence to this Committee, the Sustainable Food Trust said that

“without adequately supporting the implementation of agroecology, it is merely rhetoric.”

In putting the maintenance of natural ecological processes at the heart of agricultural production, we know that taking that agroecological approach can deliver many of the public goods throughout the farming process identified in the Bill in an integrated way, not just in separated or reserved areas or only at the margins. These systems are geared towards using natural processes across the board to reduce the use of agrochemicals; encourage biodiversity; improve soil health; recycle nutrients, energy and waste; and generally create more diverse, resilient and productive agroecosystems, which we know we need. Sustain’s written evidence to the Committee highlighted that by adopting an integrated approach in this way, agroecological systems can deliver a “higher level of benefits”, with organic farms

“supporting 50% more wildlife than on conventionally farmed land, and healthier soils with 44% higher capacity to store long-term soil carbon.”

The report “Our Future in the Land”, produced last year by the RSA Food, Farming and Countryside Commission, recommended the design of a 10-year transition plan for sustainable agroecological farming by 2030, and the establishment of a national agroecology development bank to accelerate a fair, sustainable transition. Reports on sustainable agriculture produced by the UN high-level panel of experts on food security and nutrition in 2019 state that Governments should

“promote agroecological and other innovative approaches in an integrated way to foster transformation of food systems.”

The Bill is an obvious place for the promotion of that approach, which is now widely recognised. It should provide specific funding for farmers wishing to switch from conventional production to agroecological production. The support could be directed towards training farmers and providing capital grants for the infrastructure investments required to transition to agroecological farming systems, as well as significantly increased research into agroecological farming systems. It would create a

funding mechanism for farmers currently locked into an industrialised production system through no fault of their own. We can help them adopt an agroecological approach that would speed the much-needed transition towards more sustainable methods.

Such funding could be made available at whole-farm level, to avoid the piecemeal approach of greening only the edges of fields, which risks creating isolated areas of biodiversity and retaining the deserts of intensive agriculture that we still too often see. It seems clear that a whole-farm approach should be at the heart of the new environmental land management schemes, some of the detail of which we will all enjoy over our lunch break.

10 am

In our view, agroecology is at the heart of what the Bill tries to achieve. We do not think it should be left as a legislative footnote in clause 1(5). Amendment 3, which is complementary to amendment 2, would clarify what constitutes food produced in an “environmentally sustainable way”.

**Mr Goodwill:** The hon. Gentleman’s amendments are entirely laudable, in that we should wish to encourage the production of more organic food in our country. However, in the evidence sessions, we heard some concern from representatives of the organic sector that the supply-demand balance in the organic market in the UK is very delicate, and that over-incentivising switching to organic production may undermine those at the forefront of organic production and may result in market collapse. We have already seen that—to an extent—in the liquid milk market, where organic production has exceeded demand, meaning that those who have invested in organics have not reaped the benefits they would have wished.

I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has seen research by the Royal Agricultural University, Cranfield University and the University of Reading into the impact of organic production on the environment and on food production in general. Although they found that greenhouse gas emissions from organic production were 20% lower and that there would be

“a 4% reduction in livestock emissions and a 6% overall direct emissions bonus if the UK went fully organic”,

they found that the effect on food production as a whole “would be a 40% reduction in total food production in England and Wales when expressed as total metabolisable energy (ME) output.”

That means that a massive switchover to organic may not only collapse the market but may cause us to have to import more food. Organic production produces less food, but the overall demand for food in this country in terms of calories needed would remain the same—indeed, it would increase in line with the population.

My worry is that the hon. Gentleman’s amendments would over-incentivise switching to organic production, which would not necessarily have all the environmental benefits we expected, particularly if the grain production, for example, that was lost to the UK because of a switch to organic was replaced by imports from places such as Brazil, where rain forest deforestation is carried out. That may have the opposite effect to the one that we expected. I absolutely understand the sentiments behind the hon. Gentleman’s amendments, but I wonder whether the law of unintended consequences might come into play.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Mr Stringer, amendment 11 is in this group. Is it in order for me to speak to that amendment now?

**The Chair:** It is in order. We are debating amendments 2, 11 and 3.

**Kerry McCarthy:** Thank you for that clarification.

My amendment 11 is very similar to the Labour Front Benchers' amendment 2. It would give the Secretary of State the power to provide financial assistance for the purpose of

“establishing, maintaining and expanding agroecological farming systems, including organic farming.”

For a number of years, I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming. We have not yet reconstituted in this Parliament, but the group has gone from strength to strength. It is fair to say that, when I first got involved, it was very niche; we would have meetings with a small handful of people. Now, however, we regularly pack out Committee Rooms—standing room only. As I said, I chaired that group for a number of years, apart from when I was in the shadow Cabinet, when my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge kindly took over.

Contrary to what the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby just said, agroecology is not just about organic production. I entirely refute what he said about organic productivity and so on. Unfortunately, I do not have the figures to hand, but I am sure that the Soil Association will soon be in touch with him and the rest of us to put straight some of the things he said about the ability of the country to feed itself under an organic system.

Agroecological systems include organic, agroforestry, pasture-based livestock systems, integrated pest management—farming in a way that does not require pesticides—low-input mixed farming and biodynamic agriculture. All such things deliver a higher level of benefits and co-benefits across the farm than conventional systems do. Organic farms have 50% more wildlife than conventionally farmed land, and healthier soils with a 44% higher capacity to store long-term soil carbon. Obviously, too, if the soil is more fertile, that increases productivity. The amendment is supported by Sustain, the Landworkers' Alliance, the Soil Association and many others.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge mentioned food deserts. The survey that he mentioned showed that two of the top five food deserts in the country were in south Bristol: the estates of Hartcliffe and Withywood. In the top 100, an area in my constituency is also listed. In a city such as Bristol, that is really surprising. Bristol prides itself on going for gold among the Sustainable Food Cities later this year—I am sure the Minister supports that; we are surrounded by countryside, with an awful lot of urban food growing; and Feeding Bristol does a tremendous amount of work to encourage healthy eating and tackle food poverty. Yet we still have those areas where that is a difficult problem to crack, so I very much hope we will pay particular attention to that in the food strategy that the Government are developing.

On the amendment, as I said, agroecology integrates food production with delivery of environmental and social public goods. That would give farms the support

and incentives they need to transition to ecological farming models. I am sure that at some point we will talk about climate change, but land use—the sustainable use of land, which means sustainable agriculture—is absolutely intrinsic to meeting our global climate targets. We will discuss later why there is no commitment to net zero in the Bill, as supported by the NFU. We must take the situation seriously, and it is so frustrating that, year on year, all we talk about is fossil fuel use and industry, with perhaps a little nod to transport and electric vehicles, but we do not talk about this incredibly important angle—locally and in the impact overseas with deforestation and so on, as was mentioned.

The recent Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations modelling report makes it clear that a 10-year transition to agroecological farming, which was also recommended by the RSA's food, farming and countryside commission, can deliver the food and environmental outcomes needed to feed Europe and to tackle the crisis we face. Were the Minister to look at the example set by France, she would find that there is far greater focus on agroecology and organic farming, and it has been done very successfully.

The Bill only rewards farmers for managing land or water in a way that protects or improves the environment; agroecology would reward them for integrated, whole-farm action. At the moment, a farmer might still farm unsustainably in the middle of the field, so most of the farm would not be sustainable, but could get the public money for public goods for things done around the edge. Farmers will be able to pick and choose—to cherry-pick certain things that they do—and that will not transform farming in the way needed.

If agroecology is specified as a Bill purpose, the Government could also chose to develop schemes that deliver social benefits as part of the farm system, such as community projects for public education about food growing and cooking. That is so important, to change farming from being seen as part of a countryside versus town thing; everyone eats food and benefits from the growing of healthy food.

The Bill fails to support whole-farm systems in delivering public goods in an integrated manner. Agroecological farms, including organic, at the moment may get start-up funding under clause 1(2), and certain agroecological approaches may get funding under clause 1(1), but there is not support for whole-farm systems to deliver public goods on an ongoing basis. That is not explicit anywhere in the Bill; I think it should be.

**The Chair:** May I clarify the answer to the hon. Lady's initial question? It was completely in order to debate amendment 11. If she wishes to press it to a vote, that will be after the debate on amendment 40. I hope that is clear.

**Victoria Prentis:** It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Members who have spoken with such passion. I would be delighted to visit all sorts of food producers in their constituencies whenever the diary allows.

I welcome the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to support domestic food production, and to the farmers who provide high-quality, home-grown produce farmed in an environmentally sustainable way and produced, broadly, at a reasonable cost. Clause 1(2) allows us to

[Victoria Prentis]

provide financial assistance for starting or improving the productivity of agricultural forestry, and horticultural and certain related activities. That will complement the Government's increasingly joined-up approach to food, which goes far beyond the Bill. We hope that will ensure public access to healthy food.

Last year, the Government asked Henry Dimbleby, the lead non-executive director at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, to lead an independent review of the food system and to shape a national food strategy. The strategy will cover the entire food chain from field to fork, including addressing the challenges of supporting people to eat healthy diets, producing food sustainably, protecting national food security, and ensuring that our food system delivers safe, healthy and affordable food, regardless of where people live or how much they earn.

I do not wish to shy away from the debate about food poverty, which was raised by several hon. Members, but, with respect, we are discussing the scope of the clause, and I politely suggest that food poverty should be considered in a debate with the Department for Work and Pensions, which provides a safety net and a £95-billion-a-year budget to help those in poverty. We are discussing financial assistance of about £3 billion a year to those who provide our food. I hear what hon. Members have said, but it is important not to get drawn into a debate on food banks.

Farming efficiently and improving the environment can and must go hand in hand. Clause 1(4) demonstrates clearly that the Government recognise the importance of environmentally sustainable food production. It places a duty on the Secretary of State, when framing schemes under clause 1, to take into account the need to encourage English farmers to produce food in a way that protects and enhances our environment. Those who apply environmentally sustainable farming techniques, including whole-farm systems and agroecological principles, to their farming or land management practices will be very well placed to benefit from ELM schemes in future—I will come on to amendment 11 in a minute. The ELM systems will be regulated in a different way: an agronomist will go out to the farm and consider in a holistic and whole-farm manner how systems can best support ecology. That is really exciting and I look forward to discussing it further with the hon. Member for Bristol East.

We made it clear in the Bill that funding can be provided to support better understanding of the environment. That could include funding for better education and understanding of agroecology. Ultimately, good farmers and land managers know their land best. We want to ensure that our future schemes give them the freedom to choose the best approach, with high-quality advice for their land and businesses. Turning to the hon. Lady's amendment 11, I pay tribute to her work in the APPG and I recognise that agroecology has sometimes been misinterpreted as synonymous with organic farming. That is, of course, one example of an agroecological system. Let me take the opportunity to reassure the Committee that we recognise the environmental and animal health and welfare benefits of agroecological farming systems and principles, including those on organic farms.

10.15 am

We are designing the ELM scheme with stakeholders, including those in the organic sector, to ensure that it works for them in a holistic way. We want to ensure that the system supports all farm types to deliver environmental public goods, including support for farmers who are already using sustainable farming methods, as well as newcomers to the techniques. However, we do not need amendment 11 to give such support. Clause 1(1)(a) already allows us to provide financial assistance to farmers for the purpose of managing their land in a way that protects or improves the environment. That can include assistance to support organic or other agroecological methods.

I turn to amendment 3. Under the rules of the EU, we were all required to follow prescriptive definitions. Now that we have freed ourselves from the bureaucratic and inflexible system, we are free to define "public goods" as we see them. We hope the approach will give farmers and land managers much greater flexibility to deliver those goods in a way that best suits them and their land.

We subscribe to a broad definition of "environmentally sustainable way", which goes beyond that used in amendment 3. It includes things such as minimising harm to the environment, reducing the exploitation of natural resources, protecting natural assets and restoring degraded natural capital. We want to focus our efforts not just on protecting the environment and limiting or reducing damage, but on encouraging active improvement. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Cambridge wishes to add clarity to the term "environmentally sustainable way", but I fear that, in practice, this could limit the way it is understood in the Bill. We might fall into the trap of repeating the failings of the current system, whereby legal definitions have undoubtedly restricted the evolution of more sustainable policy.

When framing a financial assistance scheme, the Secretary of State will consider the need to encourage food production in a sustainable way. That could include production in ways that minimise harm to the environment and reduce the exploitation of capital resources. However, it could also include production that protects natural assets and restores degraded natural capital. I ask hon. Members not to press these amendments.

**Daniel Zeichner:** We have had a good discussion pointing out some of the interesting trade-offs and tensions that we face as we look ahead. I was struck by the point made by the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby, because it seems there are potentially many unintended consequences of the changes that we are about to make. I absolutely understand his point about oversupply. All I would say is that if we are trying to tackle the climate crisis, we will have to manage the transition. That is one of the great challenges of the Bill.

A long time ago, I was a student of early modern economic history. The terrible crisis that faced farmers and communities was the constant problem of how people deal with dearth and plenty. Year after year, we saw populations across Europe struggling with that. I gently suggest that the post-war settlement, and the development of a system to try to manage that problem, was what the common agricultural policy was originally

about. That is one of the reasons that we now have to change it and reform it. It was never set up to deal with the environmental challenges, although there have been attempts to reform it. The basic question of how we ensure that we have sufficient food for our population, and a decent return for those producing it and living in rural communities, does not go away just because it has not been a problem for a while.

**Mr Goodwill:** The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible and considered point. My concern was that, in the same way as we strove to reduce our carbon footprint in the metallurgical industries by offshoring some of the production of steel and aluminium outside our country, we might see a risk. For example, it is virtually impossible to produce oilseed rape in an organic way; the weed pressure is such that it is almost impossible. We might find that we export production of oilseed rape to countries where that production is less sustainable, resulting in more carbon being burned and possible deforestation.

**The Chair:** Order. May I take this opportunity to remind Members that interventions should be short and to the point? There is plenty of time to make speeches in the debate.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful, Mr Stringer. I am also grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. One difficulty we have in discussing the Bill is that the philosophical underpinning is somewhat absent. These big questions of what agriculture is for, and whether we are going to have a future, sustainable agricultural system, trouble many of us. As I said earlier, those issues do not go away. He made a very strong point, which many Opposition Members will return to, about the danger of effectively moving the environmental harm elsewhere. That is a key sticking point, which I suspect will be returned to on many occasions.

We want to ensure that we can manage a transition. I would like to see us get to a much more sustainable system. I hope that the discussions we are having provide a structure to allow people to make that transition. The danger is that it becomes more expensive, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out.

We may move to lower levels of food production in this country. That is a matter to be debated. Provided the standards elsewhere are good enough, from our point of view, it would not necessarily be the case that we would want to maintain the current levels. We will come to that when we discuss food security, no doubt. It is always tempting to say that we should continue as we are, because that happens to be where we are now. Looking ahead, do we think the world is safer than it was or not? Those are the questions worth asking.

Returning to discussion of the amendment, many of us would like to see much more local, sustainable production. People worry about food miles involved. Having rehearsed these debates in the past, I am sure there are transport experts in the room who will point out that it is not simple. Not being far away geographically does not necessarily produce a lower carbon footprint.

Those are matters that people rightly want to discuss and challenge. There is no better person to challenge those than my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East,

who displays a passionate knowledge. She has been bending my ear on this issue for the best part of two decades. [*Interruption.*] Sorry. That was when my hon. Friend was a very young person.

As is often the case, people are proved to be right. I am not sure that when my hon. Friend was embarking on those points two decades ago, everyone would necessarily have agreed or given her the space to make those points. She has been proved right. It is important to pursue the matter in the amendment. I take the Minister's point that it might be possible to secure some support through the environmental land management schemes. Without wanting to sound like a broken record, it would have been a lot easier if we had had further detail on that earlier. That is why I think it is reasonable for us to keep pressing.

I understand that the Government did not have entire control over the political agenda in the past couple of years, but this has been done in the wrong order. The food strategy is really important, and we welcome it, but it just seems to be the wrong way round. The food strategy should be set first, followed by discussion on how to achieve it. We are in the curious position of trying to second-guess what is going to happen. Given that it may well be set in stone, as this is a key moment in agricultural policy, and may have to stand the test of time for 40 years, it is difficult to approach the matter in this order.

I fully appreciate what the Minister said about tackling poverty. From our side, every opportunity to tackle poverty is worth pursuing. It is a striking feature of too many parts of our country that the opportunity for people to eat healthily has been withdrawn from local communities. Sometimes, it is all very well to point the finger at individuals, but individuals can only choose from the choices that are offered to them. Ironically, it is not only in cities—in many villages and rural communities we have seen the absence of local shops. Of course, the market will do what the market will do unless we intervene.

Labour strongly believes in intervention. Where there are market failures, we want to respond to our constituents' rightly held view that if there is no fresh fruit and veg in the local shop—as is too often the case—they are left with unpalatable choices because, as demand falls, it is hard for shopkeepers. What should we do? The amendments would give us the opportunity to provide support. I know that would not be welcome to market fundamentalists, and it might not be the most hyper-efficient way of producing food goods, but it produces something bigger, which is a public good—our people having access to the food that they deserve.

**Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, particularly as I am here in my capacity as a Whip today. Does he agree that the time will come when people will look back on the Bill as a lost opportunity? We have not grasped this—the point of agriculture, as many farmers, including Members opposite know, is to grow food. Is this not the time to tackle food poverty?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. There is considerable enthusiasm in many communities to grasp that opportunity, if it is given. Many communities

[Daniel Zeichner]

do not have the resources necessary to do it themselves, without some external help and support. This is exactly the opportunity to do that.

I will touch on the Minister's initial discussion of how Environmental Land Management schemes may operate. We are all enthusiastic and want them to work well. I have rather enjoyed the images that the Secretary of State has occasionally conjured up of a cosy chat around the farmhouse table. I caution the Conservative party—I think country suppers got it into trouble in the past. Members opposite may want to reflect that not all farms are the same. I have often noticed over the years that the kind of farms I have been invited to are wonderful, astonishing places—the crème de la crème of our system. Not all farms, in my experience—I go back to my days as a rural district councillor in Norfolk—are like that. For many farmers, it is tough. As we know from the statistics, they are barely eking out a living in some places. I have never been entirely convinced that all those farms would be quite so welcoming to the agri-economist turning up to have a discussion. From their perspective, it may feel a touch intrusive, if they are told to make changes that they will find very difficult.

My cautionary note is that this may work well for some. I was challenged by the NFU to visit a farm in Cambridge, which my team originally thought would be a challenge. It turned out that we have a wonderful farm on the edge of Cambridge doing some fantastic work through many of the existing agri-environmental schemes. I am sure it will do very well under the new system. My worry is what happens to farms in other places that will find this much tougher.

10.30 am

We hear what the Minister says and we will hold her to it in future. There is plenty of opportunity for the agri-ecological sector to take advantage of these new schemes. In the meantime, partly because we do not have the level of detail to give us the assurance we need, I will push this amendment to a Division.

*Question put*, that the amendment be made.

*The Committee divided*: Ayes 6, Noes 10.

#### Division No. 2]

#### AYES

Debbonaire, Thangam	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Morris, James
Jones, Fay	Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

**Daniel Zeichner:** I beg to move amendment 34, in clause 1, page 2, line 12, at end insert—

‘(ca) improving public health;’.

*This amendment would add ‘improving public health’ to the list of purposes for financial assistance given under clause 1, with ‘improving public health’ defined in Amendment 35.*

**The Chair:** With this it will be convenient to discuss amendment 35, in clause 1, page 3, line 12, at end insert—

“‘improving public health’ includes—

- (a) increasing the availability, affordability, diversity, quality and marketing of fruit, vegetables and pulses,
- (b) reducing farm antibiotic and related veterinary product use, and antibiotic resistance in harmful micro-organisms, through improved animal health and welfare,
- (c) providing support for farmers to diversify out of domestic production of foods where there may be reduced demand due to public concerns over issues such as health, environment, and animal welfare, and
- (d) reducing harm from use of chemicals on farms, and reducing pesticide residues in food;’.

*See explanatory statement for Amendment 34.*

**Daniel Zeichner:** The amendments cover a huge number of areas that could occupy us for many hours, no doubt. I promise I shall spare the Committee that. Greatly missing from the Bill, however, is the understanding that how we manage our agricultural systems not only has implications for the environment but for public health. What we grow and the support we provide for that affects the availability of healthy food, as we have already discussed. The current overuse of antibiotics to counter high stocking densities in livestock continues to be linked to worrying trends in levels of antibiotic-resistant diseases. Pesticide use can also have impacts beyond biodiversity on human health.

The Government's White Paper “Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit”, which prefigured the Bill, highlighted the key links between our agricultural and food supply systems and public health outcomes. Yet, as my predecessor pointed out, where has health gone in the Bill? It does not seem to be there, and we think it should be.

Amendment 34 would therefore include “improving public health” in the list of public goods for which farmers would be eligible to receive financial assistance. Amendment 35 outlines specific priority areas we believe should receive funding, including the key areas of reducing antibiotic use; reducing harm from the use of chemicals and pesticides, particularly pesticide residue on food; and increasing the availability and affordability of healthy produce such as fruits, vegetables and pulses to encourage healthier diets.

Reducing antibiotic use in particular is a clear global public good. We know that antimicrobial resistance is increasing across the world and that the United Nations has identified the overuse of antibiotics in farming as one of the biggest emerging threats to human health. In particular, routine preventive dosing of healthy animals with antibiotics has implications for the rise of potentially fatal viruses, and we have already seen outbreaks of viral diseases that have spread to people, such as bird flu and swine flu, which have been directly linked to intensive farming.

Over the last few years, our farmers have rightly cut back on using antibiotics. We appreciate that, but we believe that more needs to be done. We also think that moving outside the European Union and its rules has put a question mark over our position on that. At the

moment, we have our UK voluntary standard produced by RUMA—the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture alliance—which requires farmers to avoid routine use of antibiotics, but we still do not have legislation banning the routine use of preventive antibiotics on groups of healthy animals in the UK.

The European Union has seen the light and has agreed to end the use of all routine antibiotic use, including group preventive treatments, by January 2022. So far as I am aware, however, we have heard nothing from the Government on whether we will follow suit. I would appreciate the Minister's observations.

We believe that we need concrete incentives in the Bill to reduce antibiotic use now. I am well aware that farmers operate in a marketplace and need to produce food at affordable prices, and indeed at various price points. That is why we believe that help for people is legitimate when we want to make that change. Finance should be made available to support farmers to make those changes.

Surprisingly, as far as we can see, the Bill makes little mention of pesticides. We will discuss the need to monitor pesticide use in relation to the environment with a later amendment, but we all know that those chemicals can have an effect on human health. Last year, Soil Association research showed that reliance on modern intensive farming methods means that every day we are exposed to traces of potentially carcinogenic compounds left on fruit and veg. I suspect that we will return to such contentious points later, but some foodstuff tested by the Soil Association was contaminated with up to 14 different chemicals.

In the evidence sessions, we heard some of the difficult questions about the science of such issues, and I fully admit that it is contested. None the less, it is important. When we used to work under the precautionary principle, we were cautious about such things. According to the Expert Committee on Pesticide Residues in Food, pesticide traces were found in 45% of thousands of tested samples of food and drink bought in the UK in 2018, so it is a significant issue.

The potential implications of repeated spraying of pesticides in rural areas on the health of rural communities has also been well documented in the past, although I fully acknowledge that all farmers are cautious and careful, not least because of the costs involved—people do not do this willy-nilly—but, sadly, not always in ways that necessarily protect the adjoining rural communities.

**Mr Goodwill:** I understand that pesticide residues must be minimised, but is it not the case that the current generation that is living to ever-increasing ages, with more people than ever before at 100 years of age, is the first generation not to be brought up entirely on organic food?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to go back to the Marmot report. Sadly, not everyone is living to 100—not everyone necessarily wants to live to 110 or 120, of course—and the worry is that the increase in life expectancy appears to have stalled. However, he makes an important point. I am not one of those who thinks that life was so much better in the past. Most of us can recognise plenty to celebrate in the modern world and in the technological advances we have made, but alongside those advances we have learnt

some of the downsides and unintended consequences of some of the things that we can now do. Perhaps we are at a point in time—to go back to this being a key moment in developing our policy for the future—to look at the decisions made 40 years ago to tackle scarcity and shortage. Now, we might be tackling a different set of problems. That is why the debate is so important, but the right hon. Gentleman makes an important contribution.

Going back to the potential issues with pesticides, in March 2017 the report of the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to food highlighted the fact that chronic exposure to agricultural pesticides has been associated with several diseases and conditions, including cancer, developmental disorders and sterility, and that those living near crop fields are particularly vulnerable to exposure to those chemicals.

Again, I acknowledge that some of that is contested, but it would be unwise to suggest that there is no potential problem here. If we can find ways of reducing the risk, that is surely something to be sought. It is also the case that, while those who are administering the pesticides should use protective equipment when using agricultural pesticides and there are clear guidelines and rules on that, adjacent rural residents and communities do not necessarily have anything like the same protection—most do not have any protection at all—and there are still no mandatory measures in the UK specifically for the protection of those rural systems.

Alongside that, boosting our supply of fruit and veg is particularly important for public health, as we have just discussed, so that people can have access to fresh, sustainably produced fruit and vegetables closer to home. We know that low intake of fruit and veg is among the most important dietary risk factors for chronic disease, including heart disease and stroke. I am told that, sadly, only 31% of British adults and 8% of children currently achieve the Government's recommendation of five portions of fruit and vegetables per day.

We are using far less of our agricultural land to produce fruit and vegetables than we could—only 1.4% in England, when the Public Health Policy Evaluation Unit estimates that we could be using up to 19% of land to cultivate crops of fruit and vegetables. Looking back, we had a very different mix in past times. This is part of the wider discussion about the extent to which we are part of a global trading system and want to import things that we could very well produce here. Again, it is part of the economic trade-offs.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I was pleased to see mention of pulses in amendment 35. People often talk about fruit and veg, but pulses are not only good for the soil, in terms of fixing nitrogen, but an important part of a healthy diet. In certain parts of the country, including East Anglia, which my hon. Friend is very familiar with, they are a booming part of the agricultural sector. For example, for people who cannot handle gluten, there are pea-based pizza bases and things like that. I have spoken to producers about them. Does he agree that we ought to be pushing that as well?

**Daniel Zeichner:** As ever, I find myself in agreement with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. I am still chastened by one of the hon. Members opposite

[Daniel Zeichner]

chiding me about my comments on eastern England at the evidence session, because I am very proud of eastern England, but I do reflect occasionally that the landscape has changed over the decades. We are very efficient food producers, but—there is always a but—there have been some costs to that in terms of environmental degradation. There is an opportunity, through these changes, to move some of that production to the kind that my hon. Friend is suggesting.

My guess, although I do not know for sure, is that many farmers would be quite happy to do that, because we know that farmers tend to operate within the rules that this place sets. That is why we have a responsibility to make that more attractive and to incentivise it, and not necessarily to make it attractive to carry on as we have done in the past. There is a real opportunity there, and I am sure we will talk further about diversification opportunities, but I must say that I worry sometimes about imagining that everyone wants to be diversified. Some people went into farming because that is what they want to do and they do it very well, and we should recognise that.

Going back to fruit and veg, the Public Health Policy Evaluation Unit's written evidence to the Committee estimates that, if there were a gradual increase in land use for fruit and vegetable production to 10% of suitable land, fruit and vegetable intake could increase by around 3.7% and 7.8% respectively. That could prevent or postpone around 3,890 cardiovascular disease deaths between 2021 and 2030. My guess is that the science is not exact, but the drift of the argument is clear. There is an opportunity here, and I very much hope that, as we discuss the environmental land management schemes in more detail, we will be reassured by the possibilities.

10.45 am

According to that written evidence, financial assistance should be further available to support fruit and vegetable demand by

“improving local accessibility, quality, and affordability...supporting shorter supply chains through local markets and farm shops, investing in marketing and promotion of local fruit and vegetables, supporting public procurement of British fruit and vegetables, and promoting other innovative measures, such as community-supported agriculture.”

I suspect that there is nothing in that paragraph to which Conservative Members would object. The question is whether we can amend the Bill to make that public good easier to achieve.

We do not accept that this is out of the scope of the Bill. Public health is also about public choices. Action is clearly needed, beyond the farm gate, to curb the processing and marketing of unhealthy foods, which we still see, and to ensure, vitally, that our farm policy promotes healthy food production and does not support the continued production of foods or the operation of systems that contribute to unhealthy or unsafe diets, with all the associated wider costs to society and the economy.

We firmly believe that public health issues stemming from or connected to agriculture should absolutely be considered in the Bill.

**Victoria Prentis:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his considered amendments—I am enjoying his philosophical approach. I was brought up by a farmer who studied philosophy at university—he has joined us to watch—so the hon. Gentleman's approach is one with which I am very at home. My first job for that farmer was selling plums at the side of the road, and the hon. Gentleman may have noticed that my Christian name is that of the best-selling plum variety.

I heard and agreed with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman said about fruit, vegetables and pulses. It is crucial that we recognise the many connections between agriculture and public health. DEFRA is working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and others to ensure that we put the improvement of public health at the heart of everything that we do.

I spoke earlier about Henry Dimbleby's independent review to develop a national food strategy, and I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support for it. We hope that it will ensure that safe, healthy and affordable food is available to everyone, regardless of where they live or how much they earn. We are also investing significantly in schools, to promote physical activity and healthy eating, through various programmes, including the healthy start, the school fruit and vegetable and the nursery milk schemes.

Turning to the amendments and to support for fruit and vegetables and—as the request of the hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned—pulses, the UK enjoys a high degree of food security, which is built on access to a range of different sources, including domestic production and imports. Our climate means that, try as we might, we cannot grow everything here, so access to a range of food sources is important. Having said that, I love buying British fruit and vegetables, and I encourage others to do so.

The Bill will enable us to continue enhancing food security by supporting the adoption of new technologies to help producers and to extend our domestic growing seasons. Such an increase in domestic production could help to increase the availability of different foods throughout the year, reducing imports and leading to a reduction in prices for the consumer. Of course Victoria plums are the best, but many other plum varieties come to fruition earlier and later in the season. We may need to support such native species when considering financial assistance given under the scheme.

A joined-up and practical approach across Departments is required to tackle public health and food issues properly. That is beyond the scope of the Bill alone, but I reassure the Committee that we are committed to increase demand for and access to healthy food. One example is the school fruit and vegetable scheme, which provides 2.3 million children in key stage 1 with fruit or vegetables every day.

Subsection (1)(f) allows the Government to give financial assistance to protect or improve the “health or welfare of livestock”.

We will use the power to develop schemes to tackle endemic diseases, which will support a responsible reduction in antimicrobials and other veterinary medicines and, through that, better public health. More needs to be done on antimicrobials, and the Bill provides the ability to give financial assistance to encourage good practice, but I also refer the hon. Member for Cambridge to the

UK five-year action plan for tackling antimicrobial resistance. The Bill provides carrots—if I may use that term—but we also have regulatory sticks, as not everything can be provided for within that context.

The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of ensuring that farmers can make a choice to diversify and respond quickly and flexibly to market demand. Our intention through the Bill is to enable farmers and growers to improve productivity, better tap into market demand and provide new protections to first producers from unfair trading practices. That is particularly important for growers of high-value fruit and vegetables, who too often see produce returned by retailers and processors for no good reason—I was brought up hearing all about that at the farm table. The Bill gives farmers and growers the ability to challenge such practices.

On the use of farming chemicals and pesticides, we are already committed to protecting people and the environment from the risks that such products can create. Strict regulation already permits the sale and use of pesticides only where thorough scientific assessment shows that they will not harm people or pose unacceptable risks to the environment. The Department is carrying out a review of the national action plan for the sustainable use of pesticides, which will focus on introducing integrated pest management and alternatives to pesticides. Some of that will come within the practices that we are trying to encourage in the Bill, but some will remain a matter for strict regulation.

We are already working hard across Government to tackle the issues raised in the amendment. I am confident that the Bill already provides broad powers to support further activity in these key areas, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to withdraw the amendment.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I have listened closely to the Minister. In some ways, this goes to the heart of the problem in our discussion: the Opposition are raising a series of things that we think should have funding and support through the new system, and although £3 billion is small compared with the DWP budget, it is a considerable amount of public money, which in the past went directly to farmers. For many of them, the question is: how will the new system work? As I suggested—this point has been made not just by the Opposition but by senior Government Members—the idea is that the money will transfer over almost seamlessly, provided that farmers do a bit of this or that, but that is not necessarily how it cranks out.

While I absolutely trust what the Minister says about the Government's abilities through the environmental land management schemes, I am sure she understands why there is concern. That is why we want this detail in the Bill. Again, the point has been made before by Government Members that, in future, there may be less rural-friendly Ministers, who may be tempted to look at the budget line and think, "Well, given that the local school is struggling and the local health service is struggling"—the Minister knows entirely what I am talking about. This needs to be nailed down in the Bill.

I appreciate the difficulty the Minister has, because I suspect she probably agrees, but that is why we think it is necessary to set out these various public goods to protect them. It has been said to me by farmers that, actually, farmers do quite well under Labour Governments,

so I do not suggest that there will be any problem down the line. However, not everyone necessarily will always be as sympathetic, so it would be very much in the interests of communities—particularly those that many Government Members represent—to take a safety-first approach and tie down these public goods.

This is our opportunity to make it easier for farmers, as they go through this difficult transition, to access the money that the Government have promised will be available during this Parliament. My concern is that some of them will find that money not very easy to access, so why not widen the scope so that, where they can see things they could do with some help and support for—transferring production to pulses, fruit and vegetables, for example, or tackling some of the difficult issues around pesticide use—they are enabled to do them? This goes back to economics. Essentially, we want farmers to be able to survive, but if they are disadvantaged in any way, they will struggle. Why not use the resource that is available in a way that farmers can understand and that will help them?

We urge the Committee to support amendment 34 for that reason, but also because it would send the right message about these public health issues. I represent an area with a strong life sciences sector, and antimicrobial resistance has been brought to my attention constantly since the moment I was elected four and a half years ago. It is difficult. I lose track of Prime Ministers, but the Prime Minister before the one before the current one—David Cameron—had Jim O'Neill do a lot of work on this issue. I think there is cross-party agreement about it; it is not a party political issue. It is a real concern and a real worry, and I am in no doubt that farmers also worry about it. However, market pressures—I keep returning to the same point—dictate that people do certain things. We must therefore act to mitigate those pressures and to provide help and support. We are in the slightly unusual position of having a £3 billion budget. Normally, one has to make the argument, but the money is there; the question is how it will be accessed and used. What better use could there be than tackling some of these big public health issues?

I probably should have intervened on the Minister to ask about schools support, but I was still ruminating over what she was saying—I think I was stuck on Victoria plums. It is not entirely clear to me that the Bill will allow some of that money to be utilised in that way. I guess we will not know until we get down to the detail of the environmental land management schemes, but we would like to make it clearer, as we seek to do throughout this process, not least because that would give farmers the certainty that the Government rightly say they want to give them.

On that basis, I am afraid that I would like, yet again, to press the amendment to a Division. We think it is of considerable importance.

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The Committee divided: Ayes 6, Noes 10.*

#### **Division No. 3]**

#### **AYES**

Debbonaire, Thangam	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Jones, Ruth	Whittome, Nadia
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel

## NOES

Clarke, Theo	Jupp, Simon
Courts, Robert	Kearns, Alicia
Crosbie, Virginia	Kruger, Danny
Goodwill, Mr Robert	Morris, James
Jones, Fay	Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negated.*

11 am

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 6, in clause 1, page 2, line 13, after “(d)” insert

“limiting greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture or horticulture or encouraging activities that reduce such emissions or remove greenhouse gas from the atmosphere, or otherwise”.

*This amendment explicitly provides for limiting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions to be one of the purposes for which financial assistance is given.*

I am pleased to have the opportunity to move this amendment, which would make it explicit that the public goods for which farmers can receive financial assistance should be activities that reduce greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. The Opposition believe that the current wording in clause 1(1)(d), which refers to

“managing land, water or livestock in a way that mitigates or adapts to climate change”,

is not strong enough. We must do more and go further. Mitigating is lessening the impact of something that is happening, not preventing it; adaptation is managing the impacts that we are already seeing. We think it is extremely important that the money that will go from direct payments into environmental support should explicitly target emissions reduction. The wording is important throughout the Bill, and not least in clause 1.

It is essential that climate change as a cause is front and centre of the Bill. It will be one of the most important measures introduced by the House in the coming decade to tackle the climate emergency genuinely and effectively. Through the support of the public goods, it will be a central mechanism by which we can reduce emissions from our land management and deliver the nature-based solutions to climate change that we know we need, such as peatland restoration and woodland creation.

Her Majesty’s Opposition believe that the Bill needs far more than one line on climate change, especially as we have established that the provision effectively states that the Secretary of State “may”—not even “must”—give financial assistance for the relevant climate mitigation or adaptation. There is no bite to that, and no certainty or urgency.

The Bill should set a target for agriculture to reach net zero carbon, and I have no doubt we will return to that later. The National Farmers Union is already committed to that. There is no reason not to have a sector-specific target for agriculture when we know how significant its contribution is to emissions and how much support the sector will need to reduce it.

The 2019 progress report by the Committee on Climate Change showed that agriculture in all parts of the United Kingdom is not on track to meet any of its indicators. There has been no progress in reducing emissions from agriculture since 2008. As only 30% of direct payments are currently secured through meeting

greening requirements, we know that the lack of financial support for farmers to adapt their practices to focus on climate change has been a key part of that, which is why it is so important to get the financial provisions to support farmers right in the Bill.

A great deal of the Bill, as I am sure we will discuss in the coming weeks, places great trust in the hands of future Secretaries of State. That is particularly evident in relation to prioritising climate change. As the division of funding between the various clause 1 public goods is unknown, as has been alluded to already, we very much hope that clause 1(1)(d), in whatever form it goes forward, will have a greater focus on that funding.

The Committee on Climate Change’s progress report contained clear recommendations on agriculture and land use, and on the development of an effective post-CAP framework, and firm policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There is ample room for consolidation in the Bill. I hope that the Government will accept the amendment. I say to the Minister that there is no harm in accepting an amendment that allows the Government to make their intentions for emissions reductions in agriculture more explicit with a slight but important wording change.

**Victoria Prentis:** I thank the hon. Lady for drawing attention to this important and pressing topic. We on the Government side are committed to leaving our environment in a better condition than we found it. That includes facing the challenges associated with climate change and with greenhouse gas emissions. That is why we legislated in June 2019 to introduce a net zero target to end the UK’s contribution to the most serious environmental challenge we face: climate change. We are the first major economy in the world to legislate for a carbon net zero target.

We have not made sector-specific targets, so I will not be accepting the hon. Lady’s amendment, although we are pleased with the ambitious target set by the National Farmers Union for its members. We are committed to continuing to work with the agricultural industry to tackle climate change together. One example is the £10 million of Government money given in May 2018 to help restore more than 10,000 football pitches’ worth of England’s iconic peatlands, which she referred to. This year we will establish a lowland agricultural peat task force that will build on the work already begun in this important area.

**Kerry McCarthy:** On the subject of peatlands—I have an amendment on this, to be considered later—it is one thing to talk about restoring peatlands, but if grouse moor owners are being allowed to burn peatlands, a huge amount of damage is being done, by destroying what is a natural carbon sink and releasing carbon into the atmosphere. Does she agree with me, and with her ministerial colleague in the House of Lords—he has indicated that he believes this too—that we ought to ban that practice?

**Victoria Prentis:** I do not necessarily agree that all burning should be banned outright. Some low-level burning is not necessarily as harmful to the environment as the hon. Lady suggests. We can agree on the importance

of peatland as a place to store carbon, and the importance of working together to ensure that peatland is restored and improved.

I move on to our £90 million industrial strategy challenge fund—the transforming food production initiative. Through this fund, we support industry-driven research and development to move agricultural systems towards net zero emissions. It has some relevance to the point made by the hon. Member for Newport West. It is important for us always to be open-minded and able to look at evidence. Everything we do must be evidence-based in this important area. This investment will support the development and adoption of advanced precision technologies and solutions to boost the efficiency of our agriculture. It will help to ensure that we produce high-value food in a way that maximises productivity and environmental performance.

The original drafting of the clause enabled the Secretary of State to give financial assistance for the purpose of “managing land, water or livestock in a way that mitigates or adapts to climate change.”

We envisage that these objectives will be delivered by a broad spectrum of activities, and therefore all agricultural or horticultural activities that contribute to this purpose would already be within scope of funding support under clause 1(1)(d), as drafted. I hope that I have demonstrated that we already have the powers in the Bill to cover the proposed content.

**Daniel Zeichner:** On that point, the concern shared by many of us since the previous Agriculture Bill is that the climate emergency seized all of us and yet there is no net zero target. The National Farmers Union say 2040. What is the Government’s view?

**Victoria Prentis:** The Government legislated for net zero emissions, and in doing so we decided not to make sector-specific targets, but we absolutely support the NFU’s ambitions. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman watched “Countryfile” at the weekend, but there was an interesting piece on agricultural emissions that mentioned both livestock practices and the keeping of nitrogen within soil. This debate, as he says, is not really partisan; we do not have different passions for this. We need to work carefully together, always looking at all the evidence, with improved support for research and development, which the Bill absolutely provides for. I hope that we will be able to meet the NFU’s exacting targets.

**Kerry McCarthy:** My concern is that other sectors have quite a clear road map for how we get to net zero, and carbon budgets that deal with that. I have never seen that for agriculture. I was quite worried that the previous Secretary of State seemed to think that the answer was all about technological solutions and weird and wonderful things, rather than in how the land is farmed. That is what is missing. Some of us have been talking about this for a very long time, but the Minister talks as if these solutions are new to the table and need to be investigated. There are a lot of good practices out there that would help. Why is there not a clear agenda or line of direction from the Government for achieving that?

**The Chair:** Order. May I make it clear that there is no limit to the number of times Members can contribute, but there is a limit to the length of interventions? I would be grateful if hon. Members could be precise and to the point with their interventions.

**Victoria Prentis:** The hon. Lady and I will discuss these issues over many years. I point out one important change made in the new version of the Bill relating to soil quality. It is really important that we recognise that soil is itself an essential natural asset and very important to the way we work to reduce carbon emissions.

I do not want to trespass on your time any further, Mr Stringer. I hope that I have shown that we already have the powers in the Bill—that was just one example—to cover the proposed content of the amendment, and I hope I have demonstrated the Government’s commitment to making good use of those powers. I therefore ask the hon. Member for Newport West to withdraw the amendment.

**Ruth Jones:** I thank the Minister for her considered thoughts on the matter. Labour Members are united on this. In terms of greenhouse gas emissions, this is crucial to how we move forward. We need to make sure that we give a clear message, and the Bill gives the perfect opportunity to send a clear message to the agricultural sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East talked about the road map for other areas and how we do not have one for agriculture. We have all heard about the good farmers and how they will be necessarily working with agronomists, but in terms of assistance and guidance, the Bill could be key to ensuring that everybody works together and does what is necessary for the greater good, of not only of the UK but of the planet as a whole.

We heard about the peatlands. Although there is some debate about this, we know that it is crucial that we maintain our existing peatlands. We need to make sure that tree planting continues apace. We know that the Government are missing their target on that by at least 70%. We need to plant millions and millions of trees, not the odd thousand here or there. That is not good enough. This is what we need to work towards.

Land managers need guidance and support, and the Bill should show the way, blazing a trail. The Minister quite rightly alludes to the climate change emergency declared last year by her Government, but it is important to make sure that we carry on. We cannot just declare and stop; we need to say, “Declare and so what?”. We need to move forward.

11.15 am

If we were in any doubt about the climate change emergency, we need to look no further than Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis last weekend and the weekend before, and the devastation that has been caused by soil erosion and poor management of the rivers. The flooding has been horrific and people’s lives have been devastated—some people have actually lost their lives. Businesses and family homes, as well as livestock, have been lost. It

is terrible. This is a wake-up call for us to ensure that we stand up and be counted, and the Bill is a brilliant way to do that.

The Minister has made it clear that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet. If that is the case, let us put it down in writing; let us legislate for it. The Bill talks a great deal about “powers” rather than “duties”, which is great if we have a Secretary of State who is completely committed. However, let us not rely on Secretaries of State as individuals; let us legislate, so that we have it in writing and know exactly what we are all working towards.

Limiting greenhouse gas emissions is crucial for achieving the goal of saving the planet. We must all work together in this endeavour, which is why we will not withdraw the amendment.

*Question put*, That the amendment be made.

*The Committee divided*: Ayes 6, Noes 10.

#### Division No. 4]

Debonnaire, Thangam  
Jones, Ruth  
McCarthy, Kerry

Clarke, Theo  
Courts, Robert  
Crosbie, Virginia  
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert  
Jones, Fay

#### AYES

Oppong-Asare, Abena  
Whittome, Nadia  
Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Jupp, Simon  
Kearns, Alicia  
Kruger, Danny  
Morris, James  
Prentis, Victoria

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Ordered*, That further consideration be now adjourned.  
—(*James Morris.*)

11.18 am

*Adjourned till this day at Two o'clock.*